

The Necessity and Limits of Deliberation in Sophocles' Theban Plays

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In a curious exchange at *OT* 1367–8 the chorus says that they do not think that in deciding to blind himself Oedipus deliberated well, since he would have been better never to have lived than to live as a blind man. Oedipus responds: “Do not tell me that things have not been best done in this way. Stop lecturing me. Don’t give me any more advice!” This interchange raises an unexpected question. Oedipus, it is implied, after discovering his identity and finding his mother/wife dead, could have deliberated about alternative courses of action. He could have decided to do something other than blind himself. Oedipus has decided upon the worst possible course of action, the chorus says, in ending up both blind and alive.

The same stem, *boul-* underlies the verbs used both by the chorus to describe Oedipus’ decision, and by Oedipus in his last clause: “Don’t give me any more advice.” *Bouleuesthai* means “to deliberate” or “to give and receive advice.” Good deliberation, *euboulia*, is the ability both to deliberate to one’s own (and/or one’s community’s) advantage and “to recognize good deliberation and the good advice arising from good deliberation” (Stevens 1933: 104). Words with this stem recur in the plays of Sophocles, who was fascinated by the manner in which human beings facing extremity come to decisions. His characters take many decisions impetuously, often explicitly and conspicuously rejecting advice to take time, find out more, gather information, test assumptions, or consider alternative courses of action. Such impetuous decisions usually lead to greater calamity. In this essay I explore the instrumentality of deliberation, advice, and decision-taking in the Theban plays, taken in the chronological order of the events they portray; my argument is not concerned with the question of the dates at which *Antigone* and *Oedipus Tyrannus* were written and premiered (see Hall 2010: 300–1). These processes are presented in drastically different ways in each play. Also dissimilar is the interface in each play between the way in which crucial decisions are taken and the outcome of the action in the non-mortal sphere, or at least in the sphere where divine will is what determines

mortal outcomes. An enquiry into this interaction between human decision-taking and theological imperative can illuminate Sophoclean tragedy's "bottom line" on the question of whether there is any causal relationship between human happiness and human intellectual agency. The textual analysis will follow a brief explication of what Sophocles' democratic Athenian audience understood by deliberation and its importance in running a city state, since this topic has been under-emphasized by scholars on tragedy over the last few decades.

In classical Greek ethics there was a body of "popular wisdom" about deliberation, manifested in proverbs. "Deliberate at night" (that is, "sleep on it"); "don't deliberate in anger"; "the enemy of good counsel is speed"; "women and deliberation don't mix"; "don't drink and deliberate" (see further Stevens 1933 and Hall 2009: 81–3). Two of these proverbs are combined by Thucydides' Diodotus when he tries to dissuade the inflamed Athenians from implementing a massacre at Mytilene (Th. 3.42.1): "There are two enemies of good counsel: haste and passion" (*tachos kai orge*). Indeed, fifth-century literature shows that the intellectual theorization of the nature and constituents of good deliberation was by the time of Herodotus and Thucydides already well advanced towards its expression in Aristotle. The historians' discussions of deliberation reveal that they would have agreed with the philosopher's fundamental account in his *Nicomachean Ethics*.

People do not deliberate about certainties or unalterable situations – for example, whether the sun will rise tomorrow or whether one's dead grandfather has died. Nor do people deliberate about things over which they have no control – for example, whether it will rain tomorrow. People only deliberate about *how to act in response* to inevitable sunrise, actual bereavement, or possible rain – or to the discovery that one is an incestuous parricide, or that the incestuous parricide has arrived as a suppliant in one's *polis*, or that the individual who has performed proscribed funeral rites over a traitor's corpse is one's niece. Deliberation is therefore prominent in the spheres of Ethics and Politics, which are concerned with action (Arist. *NE* 10, 1179^{a-b}). Deliberation consists of "figuring out" the answers to action-related questions on the basis of information or results derived from experience, sensory perception or scientific proof. Such deliberation, when represented in tragedy, is one part of what Aristotle called the representation of *dianoia*, or "thought," the third most important constituent of tragedy after plot and character (*Po.* 1450^b4–13). Not all thinking in tragedy, says Aristotle, is related to character, since there are speeches in which the individual is *not* shown in the process of making choices about action – speeches expressing general opinions, for example. Speeches in which the speaker neither chooses nor avoids anything are not related to character. But this leaves all the parts of tragedy where characters are shown thinking about what choices to make; such speeches inform the audience's growing apprehension, in any play, of a particular individual's personality.¹ And there are also the speeches representing the deliberative process often signalled in tragedy by words formed on the *boul-* stem, or through a cluster of associated words designating aspects of intellectual work. These include *skopein* ("consider," "examine": e.g. S. *OT* 130) and the middle form *skopeisthai* ("reflect," S. *Tr.* 296), *krinein* ("draw distinctions," "make judgements," S. *Aj.* 443), *parainein* ("advise," "recommend," S. *OC* 464), *nouthetein* ("advise," *OC* 1194), *didaskein* ("teach," "tell," "inform," *OC* 594) and *manthanein* or *ekmanthanein* ("learn," "understand comprehensively," S. *OT* 286, *OC* 114, *Ant.* 175). Sophocles' interest in these intellectual processes has attracted attention, notably in Bernard Knox's seminal *Oedipus at Thebes* (Knox 1957: 116–38); but the way they relate to terms with the *boul-* stem has suffered neglect.

Aristotle's terms for intellectual activity in tragedy, *dianoia* and its cognates, do not fit into the iambic meter of Greek tragic dialogue, the metrical form where most choices are discussed. Yet iambs are hospitable to words with the *boul-* stem and the associated semantic cluster which I have just identified. Moreover, the processes denoted by the two semantic stems in *bouleuesthai* and *dianoia* are inextricably connected, as is clear in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. When Aristotle identifies choice about action as incorporating an element of desire, he calls this same phenomenon both desire (*orexis*), which "has to do with deliberation" (*bouleutike*, III.3, 1113^a10–11), and *orexis*, which "has to do with *dianoia*" (*dianoetike*, IV.2, 1139^b4–5; see Deslauriers 2002: 104). One scholar argues that Aristotle sees *dianoia* as preceding, or constituting, the first part of deliberation: *dianoia* would then be specifically the faculty "by which we affirm or deny fundamental propositions about reality," a process that is followed by the weighing up of the different ways to *respond* to that reality – or deliberation (*to bouleuesthai*; Chamberlain 1984: 153).

Yet no amount of sensible deliberation can help in the face of extremely bad luck, or (in the religious categories of tragedy) adverse divine will, as the ancient Greeks were aware. A recurrent topic in their discussion of counsel is the relationship between deliberation and chance or luck. When the Thucydidean Nicias tries to restrain the enthusiasm of the Assembly for war in Sicily, he stresses that, although it is incumbent upon his audience to deliberate extensively (*polla* [...] *bouleusasthai*), it is more important that they enjoy good luck (*eutuchesai*, Th. 6.23.3). The poet Theognis contrasts mentally inferior people who enjoy good luck with competent deliberators whose bad luck means that they reap no rewards for their efforts (Thgn. 160–3 Young). The fourth-century rhetorician Isocrates insists that true courage is tested during deliberations (*bouleumata*) in the Assembly rather than in the face of the dangers of war, since "what takes place on the field of battle is due to fortune (*tuchei*), but what is decided here is an indication of our intellectual power (*dianoia*)" (Isoc. 6.92). Herodotus believes people should be commended who have failed but who had nevertheless, prior to failure, deliberated well: he makes Artabanus insist that, even if a competently deliberated plan does not succeed, it is important, in hindsight, to recognize that it was chance and not lack of deliberative effort that caused the problem (Hdt. 7.10).

Even some studies dedicated to knowledge and understanding in Sophocles do not include any treatment of words with *boul-* stems (for example Coray 1993). Yet I am confident that in using such terms Sophocles is revealing his audience to be capable of recognizing signals that they are to be asked to assess the competence of deliberation. The use of such language is connected with tragedy's status as a form of collective thinking done by the Athenian democracy, where the citizen audience of drama was also the community's executive body. There have, of course, been some challenges published recently to the idea that tragedy was anything fundamentally "democratic," since it originated in Athens before the democracy was established, and since many of the political concepts it examines are also pertinent to other, undemocratic, city states (see especially Rhodes 2003). But the focus on deliberation, entailing audience scrutiny of – and identification with – characters who are deliberating about action, constitutes an important way in which Athenian tragedy certainly was "to do with" the democracy: in the sixth century BCE, in the tyrant Peisistratus' day, when tragedy was invented, its characters may indeed have deliberated, but the audience that watched them was not the body with decision-making and executive powers – that was Peisistratus himself.

The Athenians heard detailed debates in the Assembly about the expediency of their policies before they voted to act on them. But the Athenian officials charged with

deliberating at length over the city's policies were the members of the "Council," (*Boule*), since it was the place where deliberation took place. At the time of the drama competitions, these *bouleutai*, "councillors" or "deliberators," were symbolically privileged as thought-leaders of the city, since they sat together in seats of honor at the front of the theatre. The importance of the *Boule* in the Athenian democracy is underlined by the haste with which the oligarchs who took power in 411 BCE ousted the democratically elected *bouleutai* and took over their official seat, the *bouleterion*, as their own center of power (Th. 8.69–70.1; [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 32.3; see Shear 2007: 102–3). The *Boule* required no fewer than five hundred citizens to serve it; these were proportionately selected from each of the 139 districts of Attica (demes) and they were replaced every year by lot (at least from the mid-fifth century on); the Council "could thus have contained a fair cross-section of the citizen body" (Rhodes 1985: 4). One scholiast on Aeschines 3.4 described it indeed as a "mini-polis" (*mikra polis*). Since no man could serve more than twice in his life ([Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 62.3), the chance was high that any citizen who had reached the qualifying age would serve at some point, especially after pay was instituted in the later fifth century, apparently to encourage poorer citizens to serve. There is evidence that originally only the top three property classes could serve, to the exclusion of the *thetes*, but this restriction seems to have been dropped in the later fifth century, or at any rate not rigidly enforced (Rhodes 1985: 2–3). The Council met almost every day (X. *Hell.* 2.3.11) and considered matters relating not only to the state's finances and the scrutiny of magistrates, but all its cults and festivals, its navy, its building program, and care for the sick, the disabled, and the orphaned. To serve as a councillor required accumulating information, assessing past actions, and deliberating about future ones *virtually all day, every day, for a whole year*. The "quality of attention" required seems breathtaking compared with what is required of politicians, let alone ordinary citizens, today. When Sophocles served as treasurer, general, and later on, after the Athenian disaster in Sicily in 413 BCE, as a specially appointed magistrate, he would have had much business to conduct with the Council, and his audience would have been aware of his experience in these capacities. Men had to be past 30 to serve on the council (X. *Mem.* 1.2.35; see Rhodes 1985: 1 and n. 3, and further below), as in practice men over 50 were given precedence by the herald in the queue of citizens wanting to address the Assembly (see e.g. Aeschin. *Tim.* 23, 49). The notion of the value of experience accumulated in a long memory reinforced the association, in Greek minds, between the age of the deliberator and the often stated desirability of considering the events of the past while deliberating about the future (see especially And. 3.2 and 3.29); the topic of age groups and deliberation is developed in Isocrates' *Letter to Archidamus* (Isoc. *Ep.* 9.14).

No amount of good deliberation could have saved Oedipus, the most unlucky of all men, since divine will had ordained his path before he was even born. Yet he took numerous decisions about action before ending up dethroned, blinded, and isolated. Indeed, the audience is repeatedly invited to evaluate how the Thebans are functioning as deliberators in the crisis they face. When the chorus disapproves of Oedipus' decision to blind himself, it therefore joins a large group of voices, belonging both to characters in the play and to scholars, who have judged Oedipus' deliberation skills and choice of actions. The protagonist of *OT* is represented thinking and reacting both in the past (when he left Corinth, went to Delphi, killed Laius, and saved Thebes from the Sphinx), and in the course of the play (responding to the suppliant Thebans led by the priest of Zeus, to Creon, Teiresias, Jocasta, the Corinthian herald and the Theban shepherd). The scholarly response to this has largely been to "take sides" – one team defending Oedipus' virtues and intelligence (e.g. Gillett and Hankey 2005), the opposing team condemning

his vices and obtuseness (for the sternest judgment, see Ahl 1991: 261–2). But, if the play is experienced as a series of “live” encounters in which Oedipus and the other characters take decisions about how to act in response to disturbing circumstances, it becomes clear that, through this practical case study set in archaic Thebes, the issue of deliberation is explored in detail. In particular, the relationship between the two possible ways to proceed in a crisis – deliberating or trying to get help from the gods – is constantly rearranged (compared, contrasted, synthesized, or juxtaposed) in different voices.

This question is asked at the beginning of the play: Is Oedipus a specially competent deliberator, or has he, in the past, enjoyed some *supra*-human assistance? When he arrives to meet the suppliant Thebans, he stresses that he wanted to hear from their own mouths, rather than from a messenger, what is troubling them (ll. 6–7). The Priest of Zeus raises the question of whether it was through divine intervention or through intellectual acumen that Oedipus saved the city before, from the Sphinx. The Thebans are asking for Oedipus' help not because they think he is equal to a god (ll. 33–4), “but because we consider you preeminent amongst men, / Both in life's events and in dealings with divinities.” He freed them from the Sphinx, the Priest continues, without possessing any more knowledge or learning than they had, but with the assistance, as the story goes, of a god (ll. 35–8). Now he begs him for some plan of action (ll. 42–5):

Either some saying of a god you have heard, or from a man,
for it is people with experience of past crises
whom I regard as offering the best deliberations [*bouleumata*]
in respect of present ones.

The Priest is not sure how Oedipus saved the city before – it was not knowledge as such, but some kind of ability at dealing with eventualities, so uncanny as to give rise to the rumor that he was helped by a god. Any suggestion from Oedipus would be welcome, whether prompted by a god or a mortal, because he is specially qualified by past experiences to offer considered advice about the present hazard.

This is an ambiguous picture of Oedipus' qualifications as an adviser and leader. Is he specially clever and talented at strategic thinking, or is he prompted by a god? It is with this question in our minds that we await Oedipus' response. It transpires that he has certainly qualified himself recently as a competent deliberator, at least on the proverbial ground of “thinking at night.” They have not woken him up, he says (ll. 65–70):

You should know that I have both wept many tears
And also wandered far and wide in my thoughts.
There was only one remedy I could find after intense examination [*eu skopon*],
And this I have implemented: I sent my brother-in-law Creon,
Menoceus' son, to Apollo's Pythian shrine
To learn what we can do or say to save this city.

Oedipus has considered the alternatives thoroughly, at length and at night, and has indeed acted insofar as he has initiated a consultation of the Pythian oracle. But he has no other solution – as the chorus soon sings, thought (*phrontis*) has provided no defensive weapon against the plague (ll. 171–2).

When Oedipus is told that there was a witness to the death of Laius, who said that a band of robbers had attacked the Theban vehicle, he does not ask who the witness was, nor does he try to seek further factual information. Instead he *speculates* about the possibility that the robbers had been bribed by someone inside Thebes (ll. 116–25).

Although I would not go so far as to assert, with one recent moral philosopher, that Sophocles' Oedipus, for all the praise bestowed on his intelligence by himself and by the chorus early in the play, "simply does not act like a man with a rational, quick-witted mind" (Daniels 2006: 565); many scholars commenting on this play have indeed been inclined to exaggerate Oedipus' skill at detective work. It is not true that he is shown "asking an extraordinary number of questions, first about the killing of the previous king, Laius (in fact his father), and then about his own parents" (Gillett and Hankey 2005: 273). After the choral ode, he does not attempt to gain any more information before pronouncing the banishment of Laius' killer, but his hunch that the killing was the result of a conspiracy leads him to make other pronouncements concerning the punishment of anyone who does not come forward with relevant information (see Carawan 1999). He is barking up the wrong tree entirely, especially when the sole piece of information he possesses about the killers is that they were *thought* to be robbers. The chorus offers him advice: Apollo should be the one to identify the killer – which implies that Oedipus should press the Delphic oracle; but he dismisses this suggestion, as if he could be sure (which of course he cannot) that no further information would be forthcoming from the god (ll. 281–2). Yet when the chorus members ask if they can offer him a second suggestion, he welcomes the offer of advice, as any good deliberator would, even saying he would be happy to hear a third suggestion as well – to summon Teiresias – and it turns out that he has already thought of this. On the other hand, when they mention that Laius was said to have been killed by wayfarers, the question is raised again of just how much effort has gone into identifying (let alone finding) the eye-witness: all that Oedipus says is: "Nobody sees the one who saw" (l. 293) – not whether he has made any effort personally to find him.

The Teiresias scene reveals Oedipus' inability to control himself when faced with an uncooperative interlocutor, as even Oedipus' staunchest scholarly defenders concede; within five short exchanges of words, before Teiresias has suggested that Oedipus might himself be the killer, Oedipus denounces the prophet: "Most base of base men – you would make even a rock angry!" (ll. 334–5). When Creon defends himself against Oedipus' precipitate accusations, the question of Oedipus' state of mind is prominent. The chorus suggests that the serious allegation that Oedipus made against Creon "was forced out of him through anger [*orge*] rather than a product of considered judgement" (ll. 523–4). Creon even asks whether Oedipus had spoken in his right mind (l. 528). The chorus members prevaricate, and well they might; for, when Oedipus enters, he launches into a blazing denunciation of Creon, calling him "the manifest murderer" and a "patent thief of my kingdom" (ll. 534–5). In the ensuing exchange Creon defines one aspect of deliberation that Oedipus would do well to activate in himself but cannot, because he is hampered by anger: he should listen as much as speak, and then judge for himself *on the basis of information he has learned* (ll. 543–4).

Indeed, Creon actually provides a description of the course of action that a competent deliberator would adopt in Oedipus' position if he were concerned that Creon was plotting against him (ll. 603–8):

To prove this, you should first go to the Pythian oracle
and find out whether what I reported to you was true.
Then, if you have apprehended me planning anything with the soothsayer,
you can take me and kill me, sentenced through two mouths,
my own mouth as well as yours.
But do not assume that I am guilty on unproven inference.

Jocasta breaks up the argument, chastising her husband and brother for their “un-deliberated [*aboulon*] strife of words” (ll. 634–5), and the chorus also tries to make Oedipus take his time to find information before leaping to conclusions, advising him that he “should never use an unproved rumor to cast a dishonoring charge on the friend who has bound himself with a curse” (ll. 656–7). The chorus sounds seasoned in recognizing that failure to act on the strength of true knowledge causes conflict and exacerbates difficult situations: like Socratic interlocutors, it informs Jocasta that the argument between Creon and Oedipus was the result of “ignorant opinion” (*dokesis agnos*) arising out of “talk” (l. 681). Even after Oedipus tells Jocasta about the killings he had committed long ago at the triple crossroads, when the chorus admits that they are alarmed, they still tell him to “have hope, until at least you have gained full knowledge [*ekmatheis*, l. 835] from the one who saw the deed.”

Jocasta is equally clear that it is important to enquire how knowledge has been acquired: she asks Oedipus whether Creon is accusing Oedipus of slaying Laius on the basis of what Creon thinks is true knowledge, or on the basis of what he only knows by hearsay from another (l. 704). Of course, as the audience knows, Creon has never expressed this view at all, so this interchange reveals Oedipus presenting his own paranoid assumption as a statement of fact. Yet Oedipus lurches between incompetence and competence as a deliberator; as he approaches the truth, some of the instincts of a skilled deliberator are indeed reactivated, above all in the desire to find the Theban slave/herdsman in order to find out directly from him, rather than from second-hand report, exactly what happened when Laius died (ll. 835, 860).

After the next chorus, Jocasta appears alone, to pray to Apollo. Her words reveal her *dianoia*, or mental process: she thinks it is a good idea to appeal to the gods, since Oedipus is emotionally disturbed (ll. 915–20):

He is not interpreting new items of information
on the basis of old ones, like a sensible man,
but is at the mercy of the speaker who says frightening things.
So since I can't make any progress by counselling him [*parainousa*],
I have come as a suppliant to you, Lycian Apollo...

Jocasta's position is subtly drawn. Any deliberator should retain older pieces of information in order to keep a sense of perspective when receiving alarming news. Such is the advice she has been giving (*parainousa*) her husband. This woman decided what to do long ago, on the basis of the evidence then at hand, and does not want to be forced to confront new evidence that might throw new light on an old set of actions. All deliberators need to keep a balance between “old” information and the offer of new and assess the competitive plausibility of differing accounts. But the second step in Jocasta's thought processes is equally interesting: she may not think oracles are trustworthy (and indeed she has no reason, on the basis of her own life experiences, to believe them to be so), but she does have the instinct to turn to the gods to ask for help when she finds that she has reached the limits of her own effectiveness of action. She is not able to “make any progress” by continuing to offer Oedipus advice.

With the appearance of the Theban shepherd, events accelerate; in the frantic atmosphere, deliberation of any kind is out of the question. Haste and passion, *tachos* and *orge*, dominate the psychological mood. Oedipus threatens to torture the old man (ll. 1150–3) and indeed to kill him (l. 1166); within three lines of full discovery he

rushes indoors, saying that this is the last time he will “look upon the light” – an ambiguous phrase often used as a euphemism for death (l. 1183), leaving the audience wondering what exactly he will do. The palace Messenger makes the important point that the actions he has just witnessed, unlike all else that Oedipus has suffered, were acts performed intentionally (ll. 1229–30). But the description of Jocasta’s suicide and Oedipus’ self-blinding emphasizes above all the frenzied speed with which the violence erupted: Jocasta, overwhelmed by *orge* (l. 1241), “rushed” to her marriage bed, “tearing” her hair, and “slammed the doors violently” behind her (ll. 1242–4). Oedipus “burst in shrieking” and “charged around” (ll. 1252–5); in his “frenzy” he forced the doors open, forcing the metal bolts out of their sockets (ll. 1261–2). After taking Jocasta down from her noose, he “tore” the brooches from her clothing and “struck his eyes with raised hand not once but over and over again”; even the blood did not drip slowly, but gushed forth explosively like a shower of hail (ll. 1269–80).

It is in the painful dialogue between the chorus and Oedipus, when he emerges with bleeding eye sockets from the palace, that the lines with which this chapter began are exchanged. The chorus does not think that Oedipus deliberated well, since it would be better to have been dead than alive and blind. But the messenger’s description of the immediate aftermath of Oedipus’ self-recognition makes the suggestion that deliberation had anything to do with Oedipus’ self-mutilation sound almost absurd. The messenger implies that some supernatural power led Oedipus to his mother/wife (*daimonon deiknusi tis*, l. 1258); the chorus asks which divinity (*tis [...] daimonon*) urged him to blind himself (l. 1328); Oedipus is clear that it was Apollo (l. 1329). When Creon enters, the chorus say that he has arrived opportunely, as the only individual who can now take care of Thebes, “to act and determine” (*bouleuein*) what must now be done (l. 1417). The chorus here uses *bouleuein* in the active voice rather than the middle voice with its collaborative or dialectical implications, thus implying a process not of consultative deliberation but of unilateral determination (ll. 700–1; there is also some interplay in *OT* between the idea of deliberation and another meaning of *bouleuein* in the active voice, “plot against,” e.g. ll. 606, 619). Yet the choice of diction shows that, even in this unprecedented crisis, the issue of how decisions should be made remains high on their agenda. Typically, Oedipus wants Creon to cast him out “with all speed” (l. 1436), while Creon more cautiously wants to consult Apollo again (ll. 1438–9, 1442–3). The play concludes with Oedipus’ immediate future as yet undecided.

Lattimore argued that the question addressed in *OT* “is not the individual intelligence of Oedipus but the efficacy of all human understanding. Ultimately limited to testing facts, judging the new by the old, arguing from probability, this faculty is not likely to cope successfully with fantastic coincidences, or to see through false but completely justified assumptions” (Lattimore 1975: 10). Yet, as we have seen, Oedipus’ quest for understanding is not supported by competent deliberation. Many of his assumptions are far from being “completely justified,” and little sustained deliberation takes place. If the text is scrutinized, it can even be plausibly argued, as Sandor Goodhart did, influentially (1978), that the play never proves Oedipus’ guilt at all – indeed, it can be read as showing how one arbitrary narrative version of events can assume the status of canonical master-narrative, to the exclusion of any variants and erasure of inconsistencies. Yet the chorus’ repeated comments on how decisions are being (and should be) taken reveals that Oedipus’ tragedy unfolds in a community where there *is* a strong sense of the relationship between the undoubted utility of deliberation and the need to cultivate and consult the gods. Nearly all the characters, as well as the chorus, raise the issue of the interconnectedness of

deliberation and divinity, even though in this particular instance no amount of deliberation could have saved Oedipus from being who he was; it could only have altered, as the chorus is dimly aware, the way he reacted to the situation. Oedipus already knows that he has been singled out by the gods for some strange destiny, although he does not know what it is; his exceptionally bad luck, which was invulnerable to well-considered action, is directly connected to the mysterious future which the gods have in mind for him.

In *Oedipus at Colonus*, however, the relationship between counsel and the divine is different, since competent deliberation contributes constructively to the fulfilment of divine will. This play enacts an aetiology, or a mythical explanation, for the foundation of the historically attested cult of Oedipus in the sacred grove of Colonus. But, in order for this cult to be established, several people must make pressing decisions about action, including the men of Colonus, Theseus, and Oedipus himself. These actions are themselves often conditioned by previous decisions, made prior to the action of the play, and discussed in detail. Some have been, or are, calmly deliberated; others are emotional and precipitate. But the balance in this play between the two sorts of decision differs from that presented in *OT*. Even the old man himself has learned, in certain circumstances, to exercise patience and self-control.

There is much exemplary behavior in *Oedipus at Colonus*. The man of Colonus, shocked to discover Oedipus sitting on inviolable ground in the sanctuary, responds with the same good sense shown by all the Athenian characters in the play; before he takes any further action, he says, he will ascertain how his fellow demesmen view the situation (ll. 47–8, 77–80). It is true that, when the chorus of Athenian citizens enters, they are appalled to discover Oedipus' identity, and at first they precipitately command that he leave. But, after they hear both Antigone's appeals and his own, they decide to refer the decision up the chain of command to the "rulers of our country" (ll. 294–5), to whom word of Oedipus' arrival has already been sent. In the Athenian world, where this play is set, decisions are taken neither in haste nor without proper consultative procedure.

The focus on the issue of deliberation and decision-taking is sharp in the scene when Ismene arrives. She reveals that her brothers Eteocles and Polyneices did consider courses of action other than laying claims to the throne of Thebes. Initially they chose a very different path (ll. 367–70):

At first it was their desire to leave the throne to Creon, and thus
avoid polluting the city, because they took rationally into consideration [*logoi skopousi*]
the ancient blight on their family line,
which had kept their household down in such misery.

What had prevented them from continuing to act on this rational decision, taken in order to protect their own city, was strife induced by "some god or wickedness of mind" (l. 371). Divinity, or immorality, has destroyed the results of competent deliberation. The sense that there are always choices to be made, even in the face of oracular predictions, is further consolidated by Oedipus' response to the new information brought by Ismene. She tells him that both her brothers are aware of the Delphic announcement stressing to them the importance of the venue of Oedipus' grave. Oedipus wonders, in reply, why they still put their desire for the Theban throne above their desire to recall him (ll. 418–19). There was another direction, he implies, in which the relationship with his sons could even recently have developed: they could have recalled him to Thebes at any point during his long exile.

Oedipus now speaks of the way in which circumstances evolved at Thebes after the crisis portrayed in *OT*, yet again showing that alternative courses of action were always available. At first, when his heart “boiled,” he only wanted death (ll. 437–44),

But after a time, as my suffering lost its edge,
and I began to feel that my fury had made my
self-punishment exceed my former crimes,
it was then that the city set about driving me out forcibly from
its territory, after all that time. And my sons, who had the capacity
to help me – me, their own father! – declined to do so. For lack of one
small word from them I was cast out, a vagrant and beggar for all time.

These lines compress a long period of time in Thebes during which choices were made in the aftermath of the discovery of Oedipus’ true identity. Oedipus acknowledges that time softens anguish and that his self-chastisement, done in the heat of the moment, was excessive. His sons, meanwhile, did have the capacity to help him stay in Thebes, and yet they *chose* not to. The Theban family could not avoid what happened to them, but they could have reacted to the discoveries with more humanity and solidarity.

There follows a scene in which the men of the chorus ask if they can advise Oedipus (*parainesai*, l. 464) to offer a libation to the local divinities in propitiation for trespassing on their inviolable ground. Oedipus readily assents to this sensible advice, sending Ismene to perform the ritual, because his mobility is compromised. Theseus arrives and provides an exemplary model of the civic leader in deliberative action. He expresses compassion for Oedipus, asks him to clarify his petition, and states that, as someone who has suffered exile himself, he will never refuse to help an outcast (ll. 557–65). That is, he clarifies the formal basis of the provisional relationship between the Athenians and the suppliant, so that further dialogue can be safely conducted before a more permanent settlement of the situation is reached. Theseus then requires full information from the suppliant and stresses that he has come personally to hear it from the suppliant’s own lips rather than by hearsay. There follows a revealing interchange in which both heroes – the former king, now outcast, and the former outcast, now king – develop this favorite Sophoclean theme of the correct way to take decisions about action during a crisis. Theseus has just asked whether the difficulty Oedipus envisages with respect to his own burial is one that concerns Theseus or Oedipus’ sons, on whom responsibility for Oedipus’ funeral rites would formally devolve (ll. 589–94):

OEDIPUS They will require to take me to Thebes, my Lord.
THESEUS Well, if you are prepared to go, then it is not appropriate to avoid doing so.
OEDIPUS But when I did want that, they did not permit it.
THESEUS Foolish man, it is not helpful to be angry when you are facing adversity.
OEDIPUS When you have heard my story, then rebuke me – but not until then.
THESEUS Tell me, for I should not speak without being informed.

Theseus here articulates important principles of deliberation. Anger (*thumos*, l. 592) is not a useful basis for action, especially for someone in difficulties. But Theseus does acknowledge that he should himself refrain from offering advice before becoming fully informed about the details of the situation. He will not be able to act, or to give advice on action, until he has heard Oedipus’ full story.

A model process of consultation now ensues. The fundamental information which Theseus needs to hear concerns the Delphic oracle that has told the Thebans that

Oedipus' corpse will one day "drink their blood" (ll. 603–4, 622–3). The chorus now adds the important information that Oedipus has made a consistent case ever since his arrival (ll. 629–30) – important eye-witness verification of the plausibility of Oedipus' case, since Theseus has not been present from the beginning of the crisis. Theseus then makes a speech of a kind that is rare in tragedy: he explains the precise grounds on which he is taking a decision about an action of which his audience inevitably approves. The proposed action of welcoming Oedipus to settle in Athenian territory (this is certainly the import of Theseus' words, even though it is not clear from the diction whether he is offering Oedipus a status equivalent to full citizenship) does indeed lead to a positive rather than a tragic outcome for both Theseus and Oedipus, as well as for the Athenian community represented by the chorus. The decision is properly deliberated upon at the human intellectual level and complements rather than conflicts with divine will. Theseus will accept the benefaction offered by Oedipus on three grounds: he is a guest-friend, a suppliant, and one who offers to confer an advantage on Athens. The first two grounds are a matter of ancient ethical imperatives, overseen by Zeus in his capacities as protector of vulnerable strangers and of suppliants; the third ground – national expediency – is one of which Oedipus has had to persuade Theseus, but he has done so through his consistency and honesty. His corpse will prove advantageous to Athens.

In helping Athens Oedipus must harm Thebes; and Oedipus retains his familiar swift temper when it comes to his compatriots. After the Creon scene and the battle, Theseus returns on stage to ask Oedipus to advise him (*sumbalou gnomen*, l. 1151) on a new development. Oedipus agrees to discuss the matter, but as soon as he infers (correctly) that the newly arrived suppliant is his son Polyneices (l. 1179), he angrily refuses to meet him. Now it is Antigone who presents herself as counsellor to her father, offering reasons why he should at least hear what his son has to say. "Father, do what I say; I may be young, but I shall offer you counsel" (*paraineso*, l. 1181). In arguing with him that he should let Polyneices address him, she says that "other men too with difficult offspring have a sharp temper, but they allow themselves to be advised [*nouthetoumenoi*] and charmed out of their bad mood by the gentle spells of friends" (ll. 1193–5). As a result, Oedipus does hear Polyneices' plea that his father support his cause as the Seven attack Thebes with the intention of deposing Eteocles and of restoring Polyneices to the throne. But Oedipus' response is an implacable refusal to forgive Polyneices for his central role in having him, Oedipus, exiled, when he was in charge of Thebes as Oedipus' first-born son.

In the terrible curse that Oedipus calls down upon Polyneices, the entire premise of *Antigone* becomes (almost) inevitable. Haste and passion are still creating tragedy for the Thebans, even as calm deliberation is creating advantages for Athens. Oedipus first warns Polyneices that "the divinity" is watching him and that this god will regard Polyneices in an even worse light "if indeed those armies of yours are moving against Thebes" (ll. 1370–2). No less a divinity than Zeus himself is implicated, along with Justice, since Oedipus has been dishonored by his own kin (ll. 1382–3). There is a suggestion that Polyneices, although he has left it too late to be forgiven by his father for exiling him, still has time to change his mind and to call off the intended siege. But Oedipus continues to deliver his curse, which does not appear to be conditional (ll. 1385–8):

May you never conquer your native land
and may you never return to the vale of Argos,
but may you die at the hand of the kinsman whom
you kill, and who has made you an outcast.

The curse is supported by appeals to several gods and concludes with Oedipus explicitly claiming the role of agent of Zeus' justice in his own sons' mutual destruction – a punishment due to the fact that they failed to observe the fundamental imperative that parents must be respected: he scathingly instructs Polyneices to tell all the Cadmean people, as well as his non-Theban allies, that “such is the privilege which Oedipus has allotted to his sons” (ll. 1395–6). Antigone tries to intervene in order to prevent further tragedy unfolding in her family, making the case to Polyneices that he could still abandon his military ambition and put a halt to his attempt to take Thebes (ll. 1414–46). But she fails. Polyneices is as stubborn as his father.

In *OC*, then, the implementation of divine plans for Oedipus and his future assistance as a cult hero to the Athenians is facilitated through correct deliberation done by the men of Colonus and by Theseus; when it comes to the Theban royal family, however, despite Antigone's attempts to offer rational advice, it is anger (although supported by, and in alignment with, Zeus' justice) that makes Oedipus curse his sons, creating the tragic battle outcome that opens *Antigone*. But in this third play the recipe – the balance between the contribution made to the action by human and by divine decisions – is different again. Here an almost total *absence* of deliberation leads directly to great offence being taken by the gods, since Creon has

cast below one who belongs to the world above,
ignominiously lodging a living soul in a tomb,
and confined here a corpse which belongs to the underworld gods,
unburied, unlamented, profane. (ll. 1068–71)

It is only when correct deliberation occurs and is acted upon that the gods are appeased. But, in the meantime, incompetent deliberation has caused unnecessary chaos, several deaths in addition to those of Polyneices and Eteocles, and desperate suffering. There is no consolation for the tragedy in the form of a beneficial new cult, as in *OC*. There is simply a mess, and it has been caused not by Apollo's mysterious and unavoidable agenda, but by the wholly avoidable decisions made by a single fool.

Creon himself likes to throw around “deliberation” terms, especially the noun *bouleumata* (“deliberations,” l. 179), but it is not clear that any deliberation or consultation has preceded his decree (*kerugma*) prohibiting the burial of the dead. Ismene implies that it is the will of the citizens (l. 79), but there is no other evidence that the proclamation was not entirely Creon's own idea. Creon's “inauguration” speech says that he has issued the decree on two grounds, the first of which is that “anyone who while guiding the whole city fails to set his hand to the best counsels” (*bouleumatōn*, 179) is the worst of men. But in the event Creon is enraged when he does hear wise counsel from the chorus, after the guard has described the dust that has covered Polyneices' body: the chorus believes that that the matter has to do with the gods (ll. 278–9).

When Creon hears Antigone defend the covering of her brother's corpse, his fury produces the first of his precipitate decisions. Without even consulting his citizens, he suddenly decides that, regardless of her family ties to him, “she and her sister shall not escape a dreadful death” (ll. 488–9 – although he revokes the sentence on Ismene, equally suddenly, at l. 771). Creon fails to benefit from several potentially helpful

consultants because, as Haemon says, he never takes up opportunities to foresee what people might say, do, or criticize. The reason for this is that nobody dares to help him deliberate, since his face becomes so frightening to look at when he hears things he does not want to hear (ll. 688–91). Haemon does not use the word “advise” (*bouleuesthai*) in relation to his father, perhaps on account of a widespread feeling in Greek culture that it was inappropriate for the young to *bouleuesthai* with their elders (see above); instead he concludes with a statement, in (arguably) milder language, that, since nobody can have complete understanding of every matter, “it is also good to learn from those who speak well” (*kai ton legonton eu kalon to manthanein*, l. 723). The chorus hastily tries to moderate even this, by saying that both Creon and Haemon should learn from each other; but Creon demands to know why he, at his age, “should be taught” (*didaxomestha*) by one so young (l. 727).

Teiresias has another statement to make about advice-taking: good advice has a long shelf-life, and even a man who has made a mistake can sometimes rectify it if he acts, however late, to correct it (in other words he need remain “neither un-counselled nor unhappy,” *aboulos oud' anolbos*, l. 1026). The importance of this concept to the play emerges again in Teiresias' retort to Creon's savage attack on his character – why don't people realize that *the most potent of assets is good advice and deliberation* (*euboulia*, l. 1050). Exactly the same term is used shortly after by the chorus, now brave enough to speak out, *euboulia dei, pai Menoikeos, labein* (“you should accept good advice, child of Menoecus”: l. 1098, unfortunately textually corrupt at the end): the chorus members then tell him to release Antigone immediately. He obeys, but far too late. Creon himself acknowledges in the final scene that it his own poor decisions (*bouleumatōn*, l. 1265) that caused Haemon's death; this event was the result of his own bad judgment and botched deliberations (*dusbouliais*, l. 1269).

Creon's incompetence as a deliberator receives uniquely explicit comment, which may be one reason why *Antigone* was so admired from a political perspective in antiquity and so intimately connected with the perception that Sophocles won high esteem as a statesman himself. Each of the three Theban plays, as we have seen, dramatizes a different interaction between human deliberation and divinely willed eventualities: *OT* has the attempts at good deliberation frustrated by Oedipus' haste and passion, but a “bad luck” situation in which deliberation would have proved fruitless anyway; *OC* portrays both good deliberation and “righteous wrath,” in synergy with divine will; *Antigone* presents an incompetent deliberator offending the gods and thus creating avoidable tragedy. But, despite these important differences between the individual ethical and metaphysical situations, the double imperative conveyed by Sophoclean tragedy as a whole is consistent: good deliberation is essential, but so is the acknowledgment that even a well-considered decision can fail to help you in the face of forces more powerful than human intellectual effort. One thing that Oedipus did know all along is what he says to the chorus soon after his banishment speech: no *man* can force *gods* to do what they don't want to do (ll. 281–2). There is one man who knows better than any other that no amount of deliberation can prevent human suffering if the latter is determined by a superhuman power, and that man is Teiresias. But, in the face of this metaphysical predicament, Teiresias does not advocate any other policy than to carry on deliberating. It is after all the same Teiresias who can say to Creon in *Antigone*, with full conviction, that, for humans in difficult situations, *Good counsel is the most potent of assets* (l. 1050).

Guide to Further Reading

Sophocles' interest in intellectual processes has been documented and discussed by numerous scholars, including Ehrenberg (1954), Knox (1957), Coray (1993), and Segal (2001). The different responses to Oedipus' intellectual acumen, both in scholarship and in performance, are well outlined in Segal (2001) and in Macintosh (2009) respectively. The interest of all three tragedians in deliberation has, however, been strangely neglected, despite Bernard Williams' discussion, in *Moral Luck* (1981), of the place of luck in the making of ethical judgments. This discussion, however, led Martha Nussbaum (1986), when focusing attention on practical deliberation in classical Greek Ethics, to stress how important it was to Greek tragedy. Both Goldhill (2009) and Hall (2009) go some way towards developing a case for Sophocles' interest in the process of decision-making, especially in *Electra* and *Trachiniae*; the topic is approached from a different but fascinating angle, which incorporates the idea of inherited guilt, in Sewall-Rutter (2007). General discussions of deliberation in ancient sources are collected in Stevens (1933). For a transhistorical range of philosophical views on deliberation, see Arkes and Hammond (1986) and Tiberius (2000). The superb study by Peter Rhodes (1985) remains the most important single publication on the Athenian *Boule*. On the ancient tradition that Sophocles' public political career was intertwined with the sentiments expressed in his *Antigone*, see Hall (forthcoming). For some contributions to the now longstanding debate over the extent to which Athenian tragedy reflects Athenian democracy, see Foley (1995), Hesk (2000), Rhodes (2003), Carter (2004), and Hall (2006: 187–90).

Note

- 1 By characterization through watching the sort of choices that individuals make in particular circumstances and with particular interlocutors I mean something similar to what Easterling (1977: 124) describes as Sophocles' creation of the "impression of individuality" through his ability "to seize on significant detail."

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